

## Book Reviews – Buchbesprechungen – Comptes Rendus

**Debreczeny, Karl (ed.):** *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 271 p.; illustrations, maps, ISBN: 978-0-692-19460-7.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2020-0004>

The present volume is a catalog published in conjunction with the exhibition *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*, organized and presented by the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, February 1–July 15, 2019, and curated by Karl Debreczeny, Senior Curator, Collections and Research, with the assistance of Lizzie Doorly. The exhibition focussed on sixty works of art, spanning the early eighth to twentieth century, all illustrated within the catalog. All these works are contextualized by the catalog's ten thematic essays in chronological progression, written by eminent scholars. The entire project stems from Karl Debreczeny's doctoral thesis under the supervision of the late Professor Elliot Sperling whose prodigious historical research in both Tibetan and Chinese oral and literary sources established a base methodology which Debreczeny has expanded to the discipline of art history by aesthetic analysis and contextualization within the historical frame. The result is a visually stunning exploration of Tibetan civilisation viewed through a political lens. Simultaneously the reader is induced to grasp the Buddhist ideals which inspired the creation of these Buddhas and deities – masterworks of sculpture in stone, in wood, in metal, in lacquer, in porcelain, woven and embroidered textiles, portable and mural paintings, manuscripts and xylographs. Far from the simplistic and romanticized views of Tibet as “a pure peaceful Shangrila” these icons and essays amply demonstrate how Tibetan Buddhism, art and politics have been inextricably intertwined since the spawning of the Tibetan empire in Central Asia. As documented by *Faith and Empire*, time and time again over the past thirteen hundred years, one may observe how the Buddhist monks contributed rituals and invocations of deities at crucial historic moments, which served to legitimize violence in war and power struggles; also one may observe how the populace and political authorities attributed victories over enemies or epidemics to the powers generated by Tibetan Buddhist rites practiced in China, Mongolia and Tibet.

It is rare that an exhibition catalog provides a significant contribution of state-of-the-art scholarship with international intellectual collaboration

including prominent Tibetan and Chinese scholars as authors, utilizing extensive bibliographical sources principally in English, Tibetan and Chinese languages. Karl Debreczeny's essay "Faith and Empire: An Overview", sets the stage for the context of the exhibition with especial emphasis on the Mongol Yuan empire in relation to Tibetan art and Tibetan Buddhist masters. Ronald Davidson traces the "Indic Roots of Political Imagery and *Imaginaire*" with detailed explanation of the concept of the *cakravartin*, models of tantric Buddhist kingship as well as the role of wrathful deities such as Vajrapāṇi. Brandon Dotson, the foremost historian on Tibetan Empire and translator of *The Old Tibetan Annals*, discusses "The Emanated Emperor and His Cosmopolitan Contradictions" notably documenting the texts and icons of the conflation of Buddha Vairocana and the Tibetan Emperor *btsan po*. Xie Jisheng of Zhejiang University Center for Buddhist Art in Hangzhou has consecrated years of study to the Xixia Empire and the cosmopolitan Tangut-Chinese-Tibetan religious milieu active in Xixia Empire and the expanded territories, which included the occupation of Dunhuang and commission of Buddhist sculptures and paintings in several of the Dunhuang grottoes. The present essay "Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Xixia Kingdom" is a revised and condensed rendition of his earlier research. Tsangwang Gendun Tenpa writes on "Tibetan Buddhism and Art in the Mongol Empire According to Tibetan Sources", thus textually complementing Debreczeny's emphasis on Yuan art and religious aspects of Yuan-Tibet patron-priest relations in his "Overview" essay. Karl Debreczeny has long focussed on Tibetan and Chinese cultural and political exchange during the Yuan and Ming dynasties which is reflected by his essay "In the Shadow of the Khan: Tibetan Buddhist Art and Political Legitimation in the Ming Dynasty". Per Sorensen's essay "Rise of the Dalai Lamas: Political Inheritance through Reincarnation", traces the chronology and conceptual history from the late eighth century conflation of the Tibetan *btsan po* with Buddha Vairocana to the eleventh to twelfth century ideological shift which retroactively recognized of the founder of the Tibetan dynasty as an emanation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, which in turn paved the way for the establishment of the Tibetan theocracy of the Dalai Lama lineage of incarnations as the representatives of Avalokiteśvara. The rituals and invocations of protective deities and their special diagrams in times of military interventions and political crisis from the ninth to seventeenth century period of the Fifth Dalai Lama is the topic studied by Bryan Cuevas, "The Politics of Magical Warfare". Rather than armed conflicts and their resolution, Wen-shing Chou on the contrary, develops the aspects of the peaceful rituals and Manchu religious fervor with her essay "Bodhisattva Emperors of the Manchu Qing Dynasty" focussing on the Qing Emperor as a great secular incarnation of Mañjuśrī fulfilling the prophecy of the

Third Dalai Lama of the unification of China, Mongolia and Tibet. The long reign of the Qianlong Emperor was influenced not only by the Emperor's recognition as emanation of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom dwelling on Mount Wutai in northern China, but also the exceptional relation developed between the Qianlong Emperor and his state preceptor-cum-personal friend, the brilliant lCang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje (1717–1786), as complementary emanations of Mañjuśrī. Wenshing Chou triangulates by focussing as well on the less well known aspect of their relation with the Sixth Panchen Lama and the multiple political and cultural ramifications in Tibet and Mongolia in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The transition to the twenty-first century is encapsulated by Johan Elverskog's essay "Maitreya, Shambhala and the End of Buddhist Empire" where he reviews the religious concepts and the political circumstances which led to a utopian vision focussing on Maitreya the future Buddha as a saviour in Tibet and in Mongolia. Elverskog analyzes the promotion of the cult of Maitreya by the Tibetan master Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) as a reaction to social chaos in Tibet in the wake of the devastation during the Mongol conquests. Maitreya as emblematic of the capacity to sustain peace and promote social harmony thus accounts for Tsongkhapa's restoration of a famous Maitreya sculpture, his establishment of a festival honoring Maitreya, the foundation of the Ganden monastery near Lhasa, named after Maitreya's heavenly realm and eventually the creation of the monumental Maitreya sculpture in repoussé at Tashilhunpo Monastery in 1461. This cult of Maitreya was later advocated by the First rJe btsun dam pa Qutuytu, the eminent Mongolian religious leader and sculptor Zanabazar (1635–1723) who cast Maitreya sculptures of exceptional beauty and technical mastery, and instituted a ritual of annual procession of a Maitreya sculpture through the capital city. Despite the political vicissitudes of Buddhism in Mongolia in the past, at present the long term persistence of the Maitreya cult may be understood by the construction in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital, of a replica of Zanabazar's 62.4 cm sculpture of Maitreya in large-scale at 64 meters in height!

The catalog is visually and historically well documented, appealing to the general public and simultaneously cogent and thought provoking for future research in academia. The volume is well edited with cross-referencing of concepts and icons discussed in different essays, the photographs color printed in large format, several maps of successive empires and their territories as well as two general maps. In the appendix, Debreczeny reviews in detail the translation and the Tibetan and Sanskrit consecration inscriptions on the reverse of the sumptuous embroidered thangka of Hevajra presented by the Yunglo Emperor in homage to his Tibetan Buddhist master. As a potential methodological suggestion, one may address the captions of the illustrations. For each photograph,

there is the title, the medium, the dimensions, the historic period, the place of conservation at present, as well as references of previous publications when accessible. There are a total of 113 illustrations of which 64 represent works of art included in the exhibition. The captions of the illustrations do not permit the reader to understand if the work was actually included in the exhibition or is a complementary work of art selected either by the curator or the author of the individual essays, or both in conjunction. In the opinion of this writer, in the future, it would be useful for the reader to be able to differentiate. Also, many of the works of art are discussed in detail in the essays, contextualized historically and in terms of their religious significance and political implications. Other works are less described in the essays. Ideally, in the opinion of this writer, an exhibition catalog offers a concise summary of the significance of the individual work of art, as well as indication of title, provenance, historical data etc., accompanied by essays which contextualize. In the future, one may hope that the actual exhibition captions would be incorporated in some form in the museum publication – perhaps as a separate CD or as a link to the Rubin Museum of Art website or the RMA publications department. The Rubin Museum has pioneered in making their catalogs accessible on line after the volume is no longer available in print edition, thus allowing computer screen magnification of many of the illustrations to afford even better visual appreciation:

<https://rubinmuseum.org/page/rubin-museum-publications>

In the future, *Faith and Empire* will hopefully also be available in this manner. At present, the purchase of *Faith and Empire* is recommended for university libraries, for both graduate and undergraduate levels. Karl Debreczeny and the Rubin Museum of Art are to be congratulated for their achievement represented by the exhibition and the production of this volume which contributes to a better understanding and appreciation of the art inspired by Tibetan Buddhism and how these works of art may provide insights on the historical and political circumstances of their creation.